

CAT lecture

1/20

History of Artists' Use of Film - Chuck Kleinhans

Cinema was one of the first modern arts to be based in a new technological apparatus: photochemical, mechanical, and optical. While rapidly expanding into the commercial entertainment market, cinema was also of great interest to artists seeking new possibilities for expression and communication. This discussion will highlight some moments in the 1920s of intense radical aesthetic and social activity in media arts, and its continuation later in the 20th century. My central thesis is that new forms do not simply arise from innovative technological possibilities or ahistorical stylistic evolution, but often emerges from the needs and demands of new social groups for expressive forms to deal with their social/political/historical reality. Work by Maholy-Nagy, Richter, Vertov, and recent work by feminist, gay, and African American artists.

Reading:

Murray Smith, "Modernism and the avant-gardes," *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, ed. John Hill and Pamela Church-Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp 395-412.

Intro:

Smith on A-g--useful background and overview.

Here--specific question: relation of art and technology.
how do we understand that relation? esp. historically

dominant assumption: technology leads, determines, dictates
thus often a history of innovation in dominant film studies, but also in experimental
thus: panchromatic film, color, sound, video, new delivery systems, etc.
e.g., change from b&w to color reversal to color neg; etc.

Experimental within the art world:

1. mass reproduced, no unique object (unlike painting)
2. what are you selling? renting seats for a theatre, or multiple reproductions (home video/CD/DVD)
3. the construction of the field of experimental film--largely as an internal, formal, development. Classic example: P. Adam Sitney, *Visionary Film*.
from art history--sequential working out of formal problems

(much like literature--Bloom)

But : other models

Bourdieu, Field of experimental, how it develops sociologically

examples:

1920s:

Richter painting, in motion

Maholy-Nagy

plan for a film (note idea of excitement)

Vertov: TMWAMC--the city, work, film as industrial process, explanation, Russian Formalist idea of showing the device (anti-naturalism)

Brecht--distanciation, vs. Aristotelian absorption....instead, awareness

actual events--Richter: , Ghosts before Breakfast

various identity politics movements:

black, feminist, gay--e.g., AIDS media

new issues, Varda, ecology, recycling, consumption, etc.

Gleaners (for small handheld digital)

Postmodernism

modernism

1. vs. eclecticism, for the clean, machine age,
Bauhaus, form follows function

2. novelty and originality, always avant garde

3. reject decoration, ornament; for geometric,
clear

4. vs. national, regional, vernacular, for the
international and cosmopolitan

5. art of the future--would affect society (but fundamentally
elitist--intellectuals will decide)

example: Le Corbusier housing blocks; NU Library
(Netsch)

postmod

characteristics:

1. plurality of styles, hybrid, eclecticism
2. recycling of styles, "retro style"; quotations, collage, parody, pastiche
3. ornament and decoration
4. mix high and low culture, assumes various responses from general public and those "in the know" [a kind of irony] but makes work accessible to both
5. concern with meaning, statement (art can communicate, this should be a concern of the artist)
6. "intertextuality" constant reference to the world of art, of media itself, as an artificial but real part of existence. Art and discourse structure the way we understand the world of "the Real". Out there is in here.

POEMS THAT GO

<http://www.poemsthatgo.com/>

INDEPENDENT MEDIA CENTER

(compare: Liberation News Service, underground press 60s-70s)

<http://www.indymedia.org/en/index.shtml>

L. MOHOLY-NAGY:

DYNAMIC OF THE METROPOLIS

SKETCH FOR A FILM

ALSO TYPHOTO

The manuscript sketch *Dynamic of the Metropolis* was written in the year 1921-22. I hoped to carry it out with my friend Carl Koch, who gave me many ideas for this work. So far, unfortunately, we have not managed to do so; his film institute had no money for it. The larger companies like UFA were at that time unwilling to risk enterprises which appeared bizarre; other film people could find no action in it despite the good idea and so declined to film it.

Some years have passed since then and everyone today has some idea of what is meant by the proposition – revolutionary in its effect in the early days – of the FILMATIC, that is, of the film which proceeds from the potentialities of the camera and the dynamics of motion. Such films have been shown in 1924 in Vienna by *Fernand Léger* at the *International Festival of Theatre and Music* and in Paris – as an entr'acte in the *Swedish Ballet* – by *Francis Picabia*. Some American comedy films contain similar filmic moments and we may say that by now all good film-directors are concerned to establish the optical effect proper to the film alone and that the films of today are constructed to a much greater extent upon tempo of movement and the contrast of light and shade and the various optical views than on theatrical action. This type of film is not concerned with the actor's star-performance, nor indeed with the actor's performance at all.

We are still, however, at the very beginning. Theoretical deliberations, a few experiments by painters and writers which have been based upon their intuition, chance good fortune during studio work: that is all. What we need, however, is an experimental film centre that will work systematically, with the most intensive promotion by public authorities. Yesterday a few painters were still experimenting on their own. This work was received with suspicion, for the technique of film-production, the whole paraphernalia no longer admits of private effort. The 'best' ideas are useless if they cannot be transposed into practice and thus form the basis of further development. The setting up of a central film experimental centre to execute scripts which contain new ideas, even under private, capitalist auspices, will therefore soon be an obvious and recognised necessity.

The intention of the film *Dynamic of the Metropolis* is not to teach, nor to moralise, nor to tell a story; its effect is meant to be visual, purely visual. The elements of the visual have not in this film an absolute logical connection with one another, their photographic, nevertheless, make them knit together into a vital association of events in space and time and bring the viewer actively into the dynamic of the city.

No work (of art) can be explained by the sequence of its elements. The totality of the sequence, the sure interaction of the smallest parts upon one another and upon the whole are the indispensable of the effect. Thus I can explain only some of the elements of this film, so that at least people will not stumble over cinematically obvious happenings.

Aim of the film: to take advantage of the camera, to give it its own optical action, optical arrangement of tempo – instead of literary, theatrical action – dynamic of the optical. Much movement, some heightened to the point of brutality.

Individual parts which do not 'logically' belong together are combined either optically, e.g. by interpenetration or by placing the individual images in horizontal or vertical strips (so as to make them similar to one another), by a diaphragm (e.g., by shutting off one image with an iris-diaphragm and bringing on the next from a similar iris-diaphragm) or by making otherwise different objects move in unison, or by associative connections.

As I was reading the correction for the second action, I remembered of two new films which seek to realise the same aspirations as those proposed in the first and the one on *Simultaneous Cinema* (p. 41). Reinhardt's film *Symphony of the Metropolis* shows the rhythm of the movement of a town and dispenses with 'normal' action – in his film *Napoleon* Abel Gance uses three film strips running simultaneously side by side.



L. MOHOLY-NAGY: DYNAMIC OF THE METROPOLIS

SKETCH OF A MANU-
SCRIPT FOR A FILM
Written in the year 1921/22

Author and publishers reserve all
rights, especially those of filming
and translation



A metal construc-
tion in the making



Crane in motion
during the
building of a
house
Photographs:
from below
oblique

Hoisting bricks
Crane again: in
circular motion

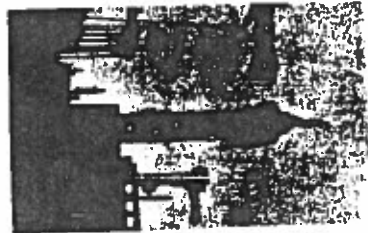
Close-up.
The movement continues with a car dashing towards the left. A
house, always the same one, is seen opposite the car in the centre of
the picture (the house is continually being brought back to the
centre from the right; this produces a stiff jerky motion). Another
car appears. This one travels simultaneously in the opposite direc-
tion, towards the right.



A tiger paces furiously round and
round its cage

TEMPO TEMPO TEMPO

Row of houses on
one side of the
street, translucent,
races right towards
the first house. Row
of houses runs off
right and reappears
from right to left.
Rows of houses
facing one another,
translucent, rushing
in opposite direc-
tions, and the cars
moving ever more
swiftly, soon giving
rise to FLICKERING



The tiger:
Contrast between the open
unimpeded rushing and the
oppression, construction. So as
to accustom the public from
the outset to surprises and lack
of logic.

This passage as a brutal intro-
duction to the breathless race
the hubbub of the city.
The rhythm, which is strong
now, gradually slackens during
the course of the film.

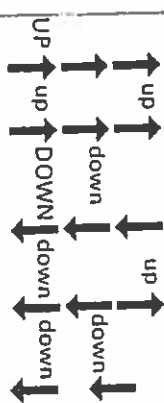
TEMPO
TEMPO
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TEMPO

Quite clear - up at the top - signals:



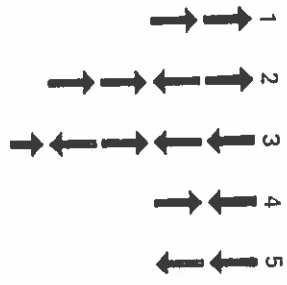
(Close-up.)

All automatic, au-to-ma-tic in move-
ment

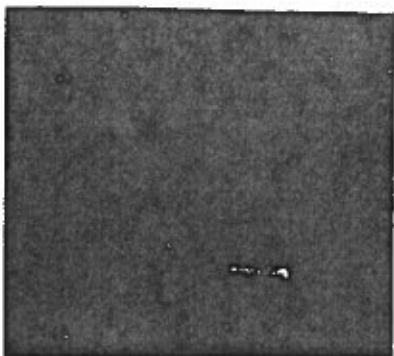


- 1 2 3 4 5
- 1 2 3 4 5
- 1 2 3 4 5

Shunting yard
Sidings



Warehouses and cellars



Darkness



DARKNESS



Becoming gradually lighter

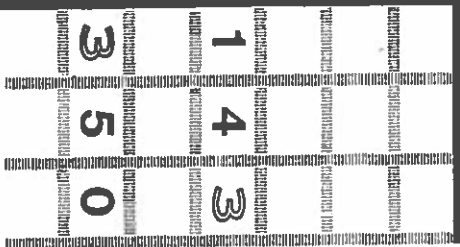


The apertures of civilisation heightened by making countless levels intersect and interpenetrate.
The train from below: something never experienced before.



Glass lift in a warehouse with a negro attendant.
Oblique.
Perspective distorted.
Chiaroscuro.
View out. Tumult.
The dogs tethered at the entrance. Next to the glass lift a glass telephone box with a man telephoning.
View THROUGH.
Shot of the ground-floor through the glass panes.

Association for laborious telephoning. Dream-like (glass-glass-glass): a gradual turn simultaneously prepares the viewer for the movement of the approaching aeroplane.



AN ANGRY LYNX

The wheels. They turn to the point when the vibration fades.

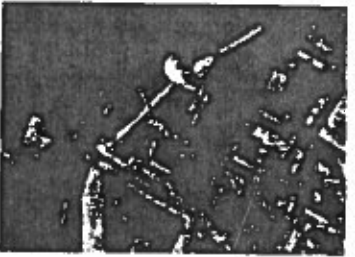


The face of the man telephoning (close up) — smeared with phosphorescent material to avoid producing a silhouette — turns VERY CLOSE to the camera; above his head to the right (translucent) the aeroplane is seen approaching in a spiral from far off.

Low aerial photograph
over a square with

8

streets opening into it.



TEMPO-0-

The vehicles, electric trams, cars, lorries, bicycles, cabs, bus, ykionette, motor-cycles travel in quick time from the central point outwards, then all at once they change direction, they meet at the centre. The centre opens, they ALL sink deep, deep, deep -

wireless mast



(The camera is swiftly tilted over, there is a sense of plunging downwards.)

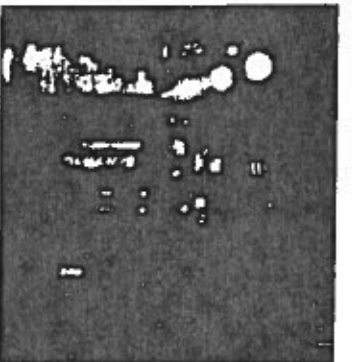
Under-ground railway, Cables, Canals.

TEMPO

Under the tramways the sewers being extended. Light reflected in the water.



TEMPO - 0 - 0



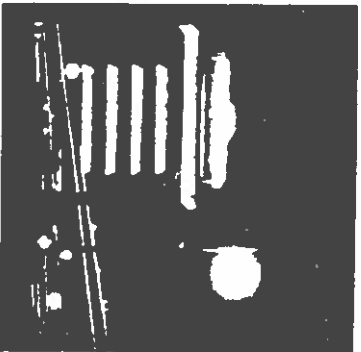
ARC-LAMP, sparks playing. Street smooth as a mirror. Pools of light. From above and

oblique

with cars whisking past.

Reflector of a car enlarged.

SCREEN BLACK FOR 5 SECONDS



Electric signs with luminous writing which vanishes and reappears.

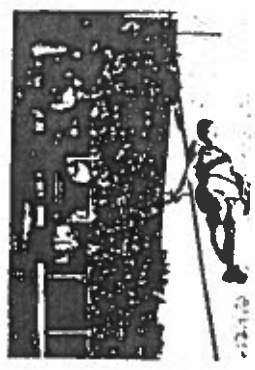


Fireworks from the Lunapark Speeding along WITH the scenic railway

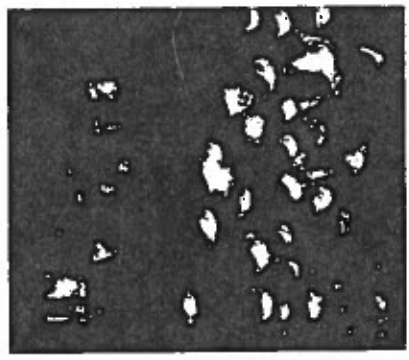
A man can remain oblivious of many things in life. Sometimes because his organs do not work quickly enough, sometimes because moments of danger, etc., demand too much of him. Almost everyone on the switchback shuts his eyes when it comes to the great descent. But not the film camera. As a rule we cannot regard small babies, for example, or wild beasts completely objectively because while we are observing them we have to take into account a number of other things. It is different in the film. A new range of vision too.

Devil's wheel. Very fast. The people who have been slung down stand up unsteadily and climb into a train. A police car (translucent) races after it. In the station hall the camera is first turned in a horizontal, then in a vertical circle.

Telegraph wires on the roofs. Aerials. The TIGER. Large factory. A wheel rotates. A performer rotates (translucent). Salto mortale. High jump. High jumper falls. Ten times one after the other.



Punch and Judy show. CHILDREN

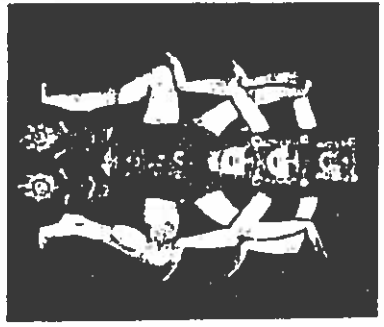
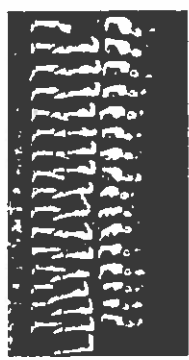


(Our head cannot do this.)



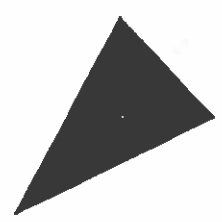
Public, like waves in the sea.

Girls. Legs.



VARIÉTÉ, feverish activity. Women wrestling. Kisch.

Jazz-band instruments (Close-up).



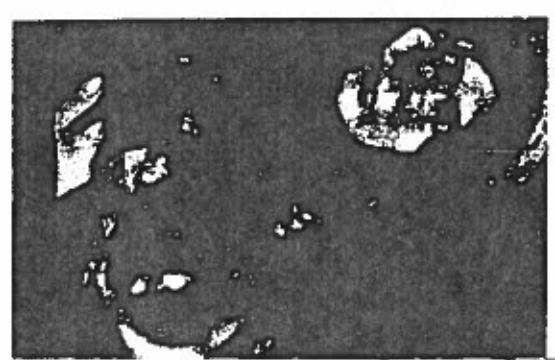
(In order to scare the public. A dynamic moment too.)

Metal cones - empty inside, glittering - are hurled towards the lens. (meanwhile) 2 women draw back their heads in a flash. Close-up.

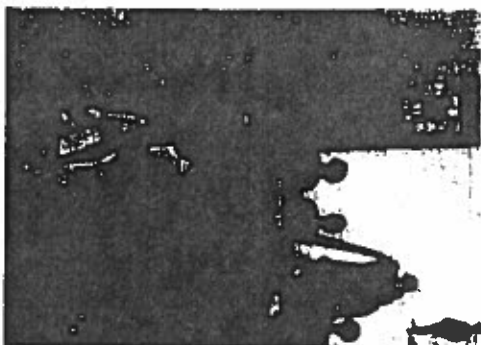
TEMPO TEMPO TEMPO



Football match. Rough. Vigorous TEMPO.



A glass of water (expanse of water with glass rim in close-up) in motion like a fountain, spurts up
Jazz BAND with the
TALKING FILM
ForiSSIMO
Wild dancing caricature. Street-girls.
THE TIGER



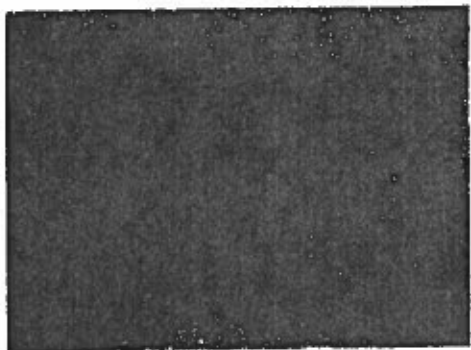
BOXING

Close-up,
ONLY
the Hands with the
boxing
gloves.



Slow-motion. SLOW-MOTION.

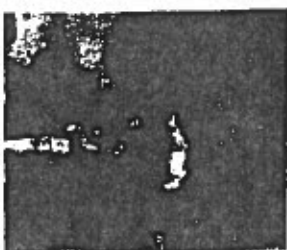
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132



Slanting chimney smokes; a
DIVER emerges from it; sinks
head first into the water.

THE DIVER

Propeller in the water in action.
Mouths of the sewers under and
above the surface of the water. By
motor-boat through the canals to the
garbage and refuse collection depot.

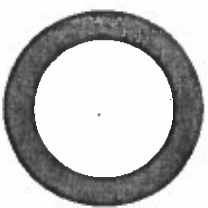


Smoke puffing
like a cauliflower,
flower, photo
graphed over a
bridge
when a train
is passing
underneath.



133

Scrap is converted into factory work.
Mountains of rusty screws, tins, shoes etc.
PATERNOSTER lift with view to the end and back.
In the circle.



From here the whole film (shortened) is
run BACKWARDS as far as the JAZZ-
BAND (this backwards too).

from **FORTISSIMO-O-O** to **PLANISSIMO**

Glass of water
Identification of corpses (mortue) from
above.



Military parade

**RIGHT-RIGHT
RIGHT-RIGHT**

**MARCH-MARCH-
MARCH-MARCH-RIGHT**



LEFT-LEFT-LEFT

WOMEN RIDERS-LEFT
The two shots printed one above
the other, translucent.

Stockyards. Animals.
Oxen roaring.
The machines of the refrigerating room.
Lions.
Sausage-machine. Thousands of sausages.
Head of a lion showing its teeth (Close-up).
Theatre. Rigging-loft.
The lion's head. **TEMPO-O-O**
Police with rubber truncheons in the Potsda-
mer Platz.
The TRUNCHEON (close-up).
The theatre audience.
The lion's head gets bigger and bigger until at
last the vast jaws fill the screen.



The frequent and unexpected appearance of
the lion's head is meant to cause uneasiness
and oppression (again and again and again).
The theatre audience is cheerful - and STILL.
THE HEAD comes, etc.

Dark for several seconds
DARK DARKNESS

Large circle

TEMPO-O-O
Circus from above, almost a ground-plan.

Lions. Acrobat on skis.
Clowns.
CIRCUS

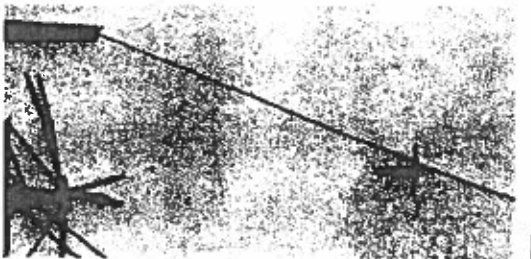
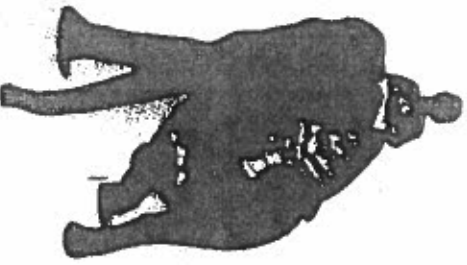
CLOWN

Dressage



DRESSAGE

Dressage.

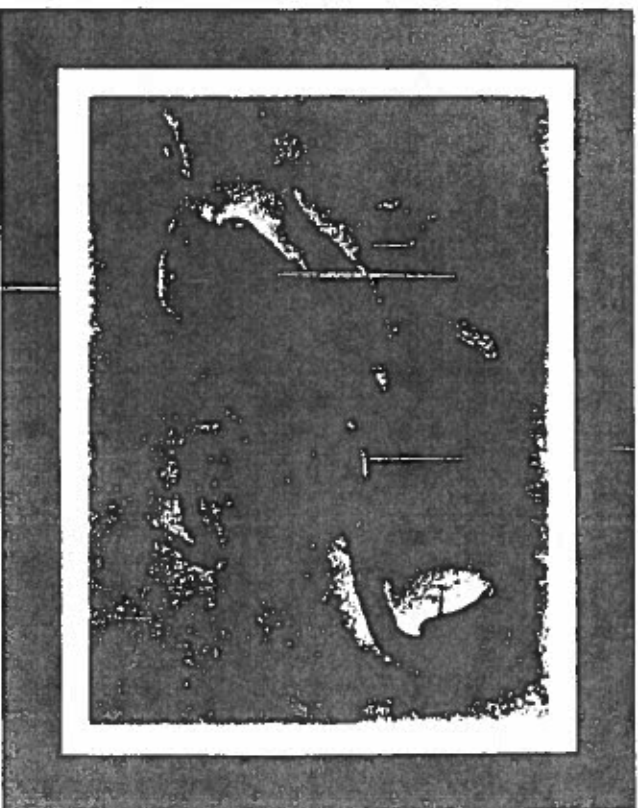


CIRCUS
Trapeze. Girls.
Legs.
Clowns.

LIONS
LIONS!

CLOWNS.

Waterfall thunders. The **TALKING FILM**.
A cadaver swims in the water, very slowly.



**THE WHOLE THING
TO BE READ THROUGH AGAIN QUICKLY**

Military. March-march.

Glass of water.

In motion.

SHORT-FAST

Spurts up—

END:

From: b-geoghegan@northwestern.edu
Subject: **CAT student questions**
Date: January 24, 2005 7:18:01 PM CST
To: b-geoghegan@northwestern.edu
Reply-To: b-geoghegan@northwestern.edu

Hi Annette and Chuck,

Enclosed are questions students submitted in response to the readings. I've also enrolled you, Chuck, for the blackboard course site, in case you want to see their essays & responses which can be found under "Communication" followed by "Discussion."

I'll pick up the videos tomorrow and aim to be at Louis 119 by 5:40. Looking forward to it!

Bernie

Questions:

1. What does the decline of the avant-garde film really mean for the film industry as a whole? How will its decline affect the ways in which people view films?
2. What can be done to perhaps inspire avant-gardes to stray away from mainstream film making that is based on the ideals of mass society, and to produce films based on their own principles?
1. Smith's essay was published in the late 1990s - who do you see as the important avant-garde filmmakers emerging in the years since then?
2. Do you agree with the idea of a "post-modern avant-garde", or do you think that postmodernism is instead robbing the avant-garde of its subversive nature?

Are there currently any famous film-makers that are considered to be avant-gardists?

Q2: Are films such as Fahrenheit 911, and Memento considered to be avant-garde?

Q: Where do you personally see the video vs. film issue playing into the future of avant-guard film? Q: There are many commercials being made today that are quite experimental and non-narrative. How do you deal with their status as an avant-guard form that takes on a purely commercial mode?

How do you feel the audience (or spectator) is thought of, are those relationships beneficial and if not, why not?

Questions

- 1) Is there a tangible difference between modernism and avant-gardism? Am I alone in my confusion of the movements?
- 2) How is post-modernism related to modernism? I took a class in French cinema and the term was juggled around (I even wrote a paper on it) but the more I learned about it, the less I understood it. Can you help clarify these movements or might they have been established to be not totally understood?
- 1) What do you think set film apart into a category in which it is critically evaluated for plot?
- 2) Do you see a feasible way to begin eliminating individual wealth as a means for the production of artistically driven films?

1. How does one reconcile the recent renewal of various forms through technology with the argument that form is the product of new social groups seeking an outlet? While this notion remains convincing in a historical context,

digital technology has had at the very least a strong correlation with a renewal of form in film and other mediums.

2. Why the obsession with naming and categories in the discussion of underground film? Is there simply no other convenient means of discussing the complexities of the art form, or does the complex but seemingly official taxonomy of film resonate with an effort to be heard as a collective of artists representing a singular idea drawing parallels to new forms as a means of expression for silenced social groups.

1) There are a number of recent movies that were released commercially, appealed to a (relatively) wide audience, and often had commercial budgets and effects teams, yet dealt with subjects traditionally confined to avant-garde film. Examples: Pi, Memento, and (I would argue), Fight Club. Does this indicate that avant-garde ideas and aesthetics are now integrated into the mainstream? If so, can they still be called avant-garde? Are the creators of these films compromising artistic integrity by incorporating cinematic elements with mass-market appeal, or do they simply have better marketing savvy than other avant-garde filmmakers? Do they (as I believe) represent a new trend in cinema that uses slick, contemporary aesthetics (normally reserved for lighter fare) as a vehicle to transmit genuinely deep content?

2) Along the same lines, how and to what extent does the context of a film (or any other artwork) alter its meaning? If a movie is first released in a museum, then in an indie film house, and finally in the general market, does its meaning change? Does avant-garde refer to the ideas presented or the film's role and perception in the community?

1. We have seen many films enter into popular culture recently that challenge societal values and structural norms in ways that Smith says avant garde cinema should. I am thinking of the work of Mulholland Drive, The Passion of the Christ, and Adaptation. And yet, I have trouble calling any of these films avant garde. What are your thoughts on mainstream cinema that challenges narratively and thematically.

2. I wholly disagree with the statement that cinema need not have become a narrative form at all, but could rather have modeled itself on other art forms, especially painting and music. (397) I would argue that a parallel to nearly every art form exists in video/film and is located in almost an identical of that societal sphere as its analogy. The only limitations on this have been technological (i.e. modes of dissemination), and we are currently seeing those eroded. What are your thoughts on this?

1. Are avant-garde films and other art forms now a moot point as the art world has begun to submerge itself more and more into the mainstream through the growth of technology and postmodernism?

2. Is it necessarily, as Smith asserts in this article, the responsibility or intention of avant-garde films to provide us with a pervasive self-conscious? Is this really what avant-garde has been since the beginning?